

Bitter but better

William

"Even if you spit it out, the feeling remains."

The thought arrived before consciousness fully did, slipping into the space between sleep and waking like water finding cracks in stone. It had been doing this for weeks now—if I was honest. Every morning, before my eyes opened, before my body remembered it was supposed to move, the guilt was already there. Waiting. Patient as a predator.

I'm sorry I couldn't be what you needed.

Saturday morning. The digital clock on my nightstand glowed 9:00 AM in soft blue numbers, and for a moment I just stared at them, letting the reality of the time settle into my bones. Nine o'clock. A reasonable hour. A normal hour. The kind of hour when ordinary people woke up on weekends, stretched, made coffee, existed without cataloguing every small action as evidence of recovery or relapse.

I'd forgotten what this felt like.

For so long, time had been my enemy. I'd lose entire days to the fog of depression, waking at 3 PM with a headache splitting my skull and no memory of how I'd gotten there. Or I'd lie awake until dawn, watching the darkness shift to gray to gold, my mind racing through scenarios that would never happen and regrets that couldn't be undone. Sleep had been a battleground, and I'd been losing.

But the medication had changed that. Dr. Chaisri had adjusted my prescriptions twice over the past, tweaking dosages and timing until something finally clicked. The new combination wasn't perfect—nothing was perfect—but it was better. So much better. I slept now. Actually slept, deep and restful, the kind of unconsciousness that left me feeling almost human when I woke. The headaches had faded too. Those brutal, pounding migraines that used to greet me every morning, punishment for sins I couldn't quite name. They still appeared sometimes, especially when I forgot to eat or drink enough water, but they were manageable now. Survivable.

Small victories, Dr. Suriya called them. The building blocks of recovery.

I was learning to count them. Learning to notice when something was better instead of focusing only on what remained broken. It was harder than it sounded—harder than anything I'd ever done with a brush or canvas—but I was trying.

I was trying so hard.

The thought of Est surfaced again as I lay there, staring at the ceiling that had witnessed so many of my worst moments.

Est.

Even his name felt like a wound I couldn't stop touching. Three letters that carried the weight of everything I'd wanted and everything I'd destroyed. The way he'd looked at me that first day, curiosity bright in his eyes, seeing past the reclusive artist persona to something realer underneath. The way his voice had sounded on the phone during our late-night conversations, warm and curious and wonderfully present.

The way he'd tasted when I'd finally found the courage to kiss him. And then—the way his face had crumpled when I'd screamed at him to leave. The sound of the door slamming behind him. The silence afterward, thick and suffocating, filling the apartment like smoke.

I'm sorry I couldn't be what you needed.

Thursday's therapy session was still echoing in my head. Dr. Suriya and I had been circling around Est for weeks now, approaching the subject from different angles, trying to understand what had happened and why and what—if anything—I could do about it.

"You're still holding onto significant guilt about how things ended with Est," she'd observed during our video call, her face calm and attentive on my laptop screen. "What do you think would help you process that?"

"I don't know how to process it." My voice had come out rough, scraped raw by emotions I couldn't quite contain. "It just... stays. Every time I think I'm moving past it, something reminds me, and it all comes flooding back."

"Have you considered reaching out to him directly? Apologizing?"

The question had made my chest tighten, my heart rate spike in that familiar way that preceded panic. "I've tried. God, I've tried so many times. I've written dozens of messages. Deleted all of them."

"What stops you from sending them?"

"They don't sound right. Nothing sounds right. Every word I write feels calculated, performative, like I'm trying to manipulate him into forgiving me instead of actually taking responsibility for what I did."

Dr. Suriya had been quiet for a moment, considering. "We've discussed the difference between manipulation and genuine apology before. Manipulation demands a response, expects a particular outcome. Genuine apology offers acknowledgment without conditions—it says 'I hurt you, I see that, I'm sorry' without requiring anything in return."

"I know the theory. But putting it into practice..." I'd trailed off, frustrated with my

own inadequacy.

"Maybe words aren't the right medium for you right now," she'd suggested gently. "You're an artist, William. You communicate through images. You process emotions through creation. Have you considered expressing your apology in a language that feels more authentic?"

"You mean... paint it?"

"I mean materialize your thoughts. Give them physical form. Whether that's writing them down, painting them, or something else entirely. Sometimes the act of creation helps us understand what we're actually trying to say—and find the courage to say it."

The session had ended shortly after, but her words had stayed with me. They'd followed me through the rest of Thursday, through all of Friday, through the sleepless hours before dawn when the guilt was loudest. Materialize your thoughts. Give them physical form.

I still wasn't sure what that meant. But I was starting to think I needed to find out.

I pushed myself out of bed. The motion was easier than it used to be—not easy, never easy, but easier. My body no longer felt like it was made of wet concrete. My limbs responded when I asked them to move, without the interminable delay that depression had imposed. The apartment was quiet around me, the early morning light filtering through curtains I'd started leaving open. Another small change. Another tiny victory in the war against my own darkness.

I padded to the kitchen in bare feet, the tiles cool against my skin. The coffee maker sat on the counter, waiting—a sleek machine that Lego had helped me pick out during one of his visits, replacing the ancient one that had finally given up the ghost. I'd learned to set it up the night before, measuring grounds and filling the reservoir so that all I had to do in the morning was press a button.

The aroma of fresh coffee began to fill the apartment as the machine gurgled to life. I stood there for a moment, breathing it in, letting the familiar scent anchor me to the present. This was real. This was now. Whatever had happened before, whatever would happen next—this moment was mine to inhabit.

I headed for the bathroom while the coffee brewed. The shower was hot, almost too hot, the water pounding against my shoulders with a pressure that felt both punishing and cleansing. I'd read somewhere that hot showers could help with depression—something about the temperature regulation, the sensory stimulation. I didn't know if it was true, but the ritual had become important. A way to mark the transition from sleep to waking, from the vulnerability of night to the demands of day.

I washed my hair properly, with shampoo and conditioner and the careful attention I'd been neglecting for so long. Scrubbed my body with actual soap instead of just standing under the spray hoping the water would do the work for me. Shaved, though my hands still trembled slightly and I had to go slowly to avoid nicking myself. By the time I stepped out and wrapped a towel around my waist, the mirror had fogged over. I wiped a clear patch and looked at my reflection—really looked, in a way I'd been avoiding.

The face that stared back was thinner than I remembered. The weeks of poor eating had left their mark, hollowing out my cheeks and sharpening the angles of my jaw. There were dark circles under my eyes that no amount of sleep could quite erase, ghosts of all those wakeful nights. But there was something else there too. Something that might have been life returning to features that had gone flat with despair.

You're still here, I told my reflection. You're still trying.

I made a choice that still felt significant: I didn't reach for my pajamas.

The drawer where I kept my comfortable clothes—the soft cotton that had become my uniform during the worst of my isolation—stayed closed. Instead, I opened the other drawer. The one with real clothes. The jeans and sweaters and shirts that a normal person might wear to go out into the world.

Not that I was going out into the world. Not today. But the act of dressing felt like a statement anyway. A small rebellion against the voice in my head that whispered why bother? You're just going to stay inside anyway. No one's going to see you.

I chose jeans—dark blue, well-fitting—and a charcoal sweater that was soft but structured. I even put on socks, though I wouldn't be wearing shoes. The complete outfit made me feel more human. More present. More like someone who was participating in Saturday rather than just enduring it.

The coffee was ready when I returned to the kitchen. I poured myself a cup and grabbed a package of cookies from the cupboard—butter biscuits, the kind Lego had stocked during his last visit, insisting that I needed things to eat that weren't instant noodles or stale crackers. "Snacks," he'd said firmly, arranging packages on my shelves with the efficiency of someone who'd spent too much time taking care of other people. "You need actual snacks, P'Will. Things you can grab when you don't feel like cooking."

I'd protested weakly—something about not needing to be taken care of—but I'd been grateful anyway. I was still grateful, every time I reached into the cupboard and found something edible waiting for me.

I settled onto the sofa with my coffee and cookies, the television flickering to life in the background. Some morning show I wasn't really watching—just noise to fill the

silence, voices to remind me that the world outside my apartment was still turning. The warmth of the coffee seeped into my hands as I wrapped them around the cup. I ate the cookies slowly, methodically, one bite at a time, not really tasting them but going through the motions because the motions mattered. Because eating was something living people did, and I was trying to be living.

And then my eyes drifted to the window.

The curtains were already open—I'd been leaving them open more often lately, letting daylight into the apartment, letting the outside world exist in my peripheral vision even when I couldn't join it. But the window itself was closed. It was always closed.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd opened it. Months, probably. Maybe longer. The latch had become decorative, something that existed but never got used, a feature of the architecture that had lost all function.

There had been a time when opening windows felt dangerous. When the idea of unfiltered air, of uncontrolled environmental factors, of the outside world having direct access to my interior space—all of it had triggered a panic that bordered on terror. I'd checked the windows obsessively, making sure they were sealed, making sure nothing could get in, making sure I was safe within my carefully controlled bubble.

The medication had quieted that voice. Not silenced it—it was still there, a background hum of anxiety that would probably never fully disappear—but turned the volume down enough that other thoughts could be heard. Right now, looking at the closed window, I didn't feel the familiar spike of fear that used to accompany even the thought of opening it.

I felt... curious.

What would it be like? To feel the outside air on my skin. To hear the sounds of the city without glass between us. To let the world in, just a little, just for a moment.

I set down my coffee cup.

The walk to the window was only a few steps, but it felt longer. Each footfall deliberate, each breath measured. My heart was beating faster—not the racing panic of before, but the elevated rhythm of someone approaching something significant. The latch was cool under my trembling fingers. I could feel the metal, slightly rough where the paint had worn away from years of disuse. Such a small mechanism. Such an ordinary thing. Something most people touched every day without thinking about it.

You don't have to do this, the voice whispered. The window can stay closed. You're safe in here. You've always been safe in here.

But Dr. Suriya's words were louder: Materialize your thoughts. Give them physical form. Sometimes action is the only way forward.

I undid the latch.

The window swung open. Air rushed in—cool and damp from the recent rains, carrying the smell of wet pavement and distant traffic and something green, something growing, something alive. It hit my face like a gentle slap, startling in its immediacy, overwhelming in its realness. I gripped the windowsill, breathing through the sensation. Too much, my brain insisted. Too much input, too much change, too much outside getting inside—But I stayed where I was. I stayed and I breathed and I let my system adjust.

And slowly, gradually, the panic receded. What remained was just... air. Just the world, doing what it always did, existing whether I participated or not. The sounds of traffic filtered up from the street below. Somewhere, a bird was singing. The dampness in the air carried hints of the rain that had passed, the storm that had moved on. I stood there for a long time, feeling the breeze on my face, watching the morning unfold beyond my walls.

Small victory, I thought. Another one.

But even as the moment stretched—even as I allowed myself to feel something like pride in this tiny act of courage—the guilt remained.

It was always there, underneath everything. The medication couldn't touch it. The therapy sessions could examine it, illuminate it, help me understand its shape and origin, but they couldn't make it disappear. It was part of me now, woven into the fabric of who I was, inseparable from the person I'd become.

Est.

His name surfaced again, inevitable as tide.

The beautiful memories came with it. The hours we'd talked—really talked, about art and life and fear and hope. He'd asked questions no one else had thought to ask, listened to answers I hadn't known I had. He'd looked at my paintings and seen something worth seeing. He'd looked at me and seen someone worth knowing.

The phone calls late at night, when neither of us could sleep and the distance between us shrank to nothing. His voice in my ear, curious and warm, making the darkness feel less absolute. The way he'd laugh at something I said, surprised by his own amusement, the sound of it like light breaking through clouds.

The dates—if you could call them that. Him coming to my apartment because I couldn't go to him, setting up his camera, pretending to work while we circled around the thing building between us. The tension that had grown with every visit,

electric and terrifying and wonderful all at once.

And the kiss.

God, the kiss.

I'd been so scared. Scared to want him, scared to let him see how much I wanted him, scared that wanting anything so badly would only make losing it hurt more. But he'd been there, close enough to touch, looking at me with those eyes that saw everything—and I'd kissed him anyway. Because not kissing him had become more unbearable than the fear.

Beautiful memories. All of them.

Memories I'd destroyed with my terrible mental health. With the panic attack that had shattered everything. With the screaming and the throwing things and the moment I'd grabbed that reflector stand and sent it crashing to the floor.

Get out, I'd screamed. Just get out.

And he had.

Because I'd given him no choice.

I closed the window eventually, but I left the curtains open. The apartment felt different now—less like a sealed container and more like a space that was choosing to be enclosed. A subtle distinction, but it mattered to me. I finished my coffee. Ate the rest of the cookies, barely tasting them, the act of consumption more automatic than intentional. The guilt was building now, triggered by the memories, gathering strength like storm clouds on the horizon. Dr. Suriya's voice echoed through my thoughts: Materialize your feelings. Give them physical form. Have the courage to finally apologize.

I'd been trying. God knew I'd been trying. The draft folder in my phone was full of unsent messages, each one representing hours of composition and revision, each one ultimately deleted because nothing sounded right.

I'm sorry for what happened during the session.

Too vague. Too impersonal. It didn't capture anything real.

I know I hurt you, and I'm sorry.

Better, but still hollow. It acknowledged the hurt but didn't explain it, didn't offer any understanding of why things had gone so wrong.

I was having a breakdown and I took it out on you and I'm sorry.

Closer to the truth, but it felt like an excuse. Like I was using my mental illness as a

shield, as a reason why he should forgive me rather than a confession of what I'd done.

Every night before sleep—I rewrote these messages in my head. I composed apologies and explanations and pleas for understanding, turning the words over and over like stones in a tumbler, trying to smooth away their rough edges. And every night, I deleted them without sending. Because none of them were right. Because nothing I could say would undo what I'd done. And because—underneath all the composing and revising and deleting—I was terrified.

Terrified that he'd ignore my message. Terrified that he'd respond with anger or contempt. Terrified that he'd forgive me too easily and I'd have to live with the knowledge that I didn't deserve it. Terrified, most of all, that he'd moved on entirely and my apology would be nothing but a reminder of someone he'd rather forget.

The courage to finally apologize, Dr. Suriya had said.

I didn't feel courageous. I felt like a coward, hiding behind my walls, unable to take the single step that might begin to make things right. But maybe—maybe there was another way.

The studio was waiting for me. I hadn't been avoiding it exactly—I'd painted every day this week, maintaining the routine that had become my lifeline—but there were corners of the room I'd been skirting around. Canvases I'd been refusing to look at directly. Work that was too tangled up with Est to approach safely.

Today, something felt different. Maybe it was the window. The act of opening it, of letting the outside air touch my skin, of proving to myself that small brave actions were still possible. Or maybe it was the weight of Dr. Suriya's words, pressing down harder now that the session was days behind me and the advice remained unfollowed.

Materialize your thoughts.

I walked into the studio and went straight to the corner I'd been avoiding.

The painting was where I'd left it, propped against the wall and covered with a cloth I'd thrown over it weeks ago. The fabric was slightly dusty now, evidence of time passing, of my own neglect. I'd been too scared to look at it. Too scared of what I'd feel when I did.

I pulled the cloth away.

Est's hands looked back at me. I'd painted them from memory, working late at night when the rest of the apartment was dark and quiet. His hands holding an invisible camera, the pose so familiar I could render it without reference. The careful grip of his fingers. The subtle tension in his wrists. The angle that spoke of years of



practice, of muscle memory built through countless hours of work.

I'd chosen cold colors for the painting—grays and blues, muted tones that captured something of the absence I felt. The hands floated in negative space, emerging from shadow, disconnected from any body or context. Beautiful hands. Precise hands. The hands of someone who knew how to see the world and capture it.

The hands that had touched my face before I'd destroyed everything.

The painting was good. That wasn't ego—just the clinical assessment of an artist evaluating his own work. The technique was solid, the composition balanced, the emotion raw and present. But it was also incomplete. Unfinished. The hands held nothing, reached for nothing, existed in a void of gray and blue that felt like grief made visible.

Could this be my apology?

The thought surfaced before I could stop it. I'd been sending paintings to the gallery—wrapped and shipped, ready for the exhibition—but this one had never been intended for public display. It was too personal. Too painful. A private confession rendered in pigment and brushstroke. But maybe that was exactly why it could work. Maybe a painted apology would say what my drafted texts never could. Maybe the brush would be more honest than the keyboard. Maybe, after all this time, I could communicate through the only language I'd ever truly mastered.

Would Est accept it?

I didn't know. I couldn't know. But the possibility felt real in a way the unsent texts never had.

How could I send it to him?

That was a practical problem. A solvable one. I moved to my laptop before I could talk myself out of it.

The email to my manager was brief but clear:

I need to send something to the photographer—Est Supha Sangaworawong. Something personal. An apology. Could you possibly get his address from his company? I know this is an unusual request, but it's important to me. Please let me know if this is possible. Thank you.

I read it over three times, checking for anything that sounded manipulative or demanding. It was simple. Direct. It didn't ask for anything except an address—a way to make contact, a path for the apology to travel.

Face the consequences, Dr. Suriya's voice echoed in my mind. Even if he doesn't respond. Even if he throws the painting away. The act of offering is still valuable. It

still matters.

I hit send.

The email disappeared into the digital ether, and I sat back in my chair, my heart pounding with something that felt almost like hope. I'd taken a step. A small one, but real. The path forward was uncertain, but at least I was moving. And now—now there was work to do.

I turned back to the painting.

Est's hands, gray and blue, floating in their void. The technical execution was strong, but something was missing. Something that would transform it from a portrait of absence into a genuine apology.

My eyes drifted around the studio, searching for inspiration, and landed on the flowers by the window.

Red roses.

They'd been there for days—something Lego had brought during his last visit because the flower shop was low on more interesting options. "Sorry," he'd said, arranging them in a vase with his characteristic precision. "I know you prefer the unusual ones, but this was all they had. At least they're fresh."

I'd barely noticed them at the time, too caught up in my own darkness to appreciate the gesture. They'd sat there on the windowsill, slowly wilting, their petals dropping onto the surface below. Ordinary flowers. Common flowers. The kind of thing every couple gave each other at some point in a relationship.

The kind of thing I'd never given Est.

The realization hit me like cold water.

I'd kissed him. I'd painted him. I'd let him into my apartment, into my studio, into the carefully guarded fortress of my isolation. But I'd never done the simple things. The obvious things. The gestures that ordinary people made when they were falling for someone.

I'd never brought him flowers.

I'd never taken him to dinner.

I'd never said I want you here with me.

All those words that other people seemed to speak so easily—they'd gotten stuck in my throat, trapped behind walls of fear and self-doubt, never making it past my lips. And now it was too late. Now he was gone, and the words would never be spoken, and the flowers would never be given, and all the simple, ordinary expressions of

affection had been sacrificed to my inability to be normal. But maybe—maybe I could paint them instead.

I looked at the roses more closely. Their red was vivid despite the wilting, a defiant burst of color against the neutral backdrop of my studio. That crimson—rich and warm and absolutely alive—would look extraordinary against the gray and blue of Est's hands. A single point of brightness in all that muted shadow. Color breaking through the coldness like hope refusing to die.

The metaphor was almost too obvious. Too on-the-nose. But sometimes obvious was exactly right. Sometimes the truth was simple enough that it didn't need to be obscured by complexity.

A red rose. The thing I'd never given him. The gesture I'd never made. All those opportunities to say I choose you, I want you, please stay—squandered because I was too afraid, too broken, too convinced that anything I reached for would crumble in my grasp. But I could paint it. I could give him, in pigment and canvas, what I'd never managed to give him in life.

I moved to my worktable with a purpose I hadn't felt in weeks.

My paints were organized by color family—a system Lego had helped me implement during one of his cleaning sessions, when the chaos of my studio had finally become too much to navigate. The reds lived together in one section: cadmium red, crimson lake, alizarin, vermillion. Dozens of tubes representing years of accumulation, every possible shade from the palest pink to the deepest burgundy.

I pulled them out one by one, examining each color with a critical eye. The rose I was imagining wasn't any of these exactly—it was a combination, a layering, something that would have to be built from multiple pigments to achieve the right depth and vibrancy.

I set up my palette and began mixing. The first attempt was too orange—too much cadmium, not enough crimson. I scraped it off and started again. The second was better but still not right—too flat, lacking the complexity that would make it feel alive. The third time, I added a touch of alizarin to the mix, and something clicked. The color that emerged was rich and warm and glowing, exactly the red I'd been seeing in my mind.

The red of desire. The red of passion. The red of all the words I'd never spoken.

I carried my palette to the easel where Est's painting waited.

The gray-blue hands looked up at me, patient and incomplete. The space between them was empty—had always been empty, a void I'd never known how to fill. But now I knew. Now the void had a purpose.

I picked up my smallest brush and dipped it in the red.

The first stroke felt like a confession. A single line of crimson, cutting through the gray like a wound opening. I placed it carefully, following the curve of Est's thumb, suggesting the beginning of a petal. The color was stark against the monochrome background—jarring, almost, in its intensity. But that was the point. The rose wasn't supposed to blend in. It was supposed to demand attention. To say look at me. Look at what was always here, hidden beneath the gray. I worked slowly, building the flower petal by petal.

There was no sketch underneath, no careful planning. Just instinct guiding my hand, muscle memory and emotion combining into something that felt more like channeling than creating. The brush moved where it needed to move. The paint landed where it needed to land.

Between Est's fingers, the rose began to take shape.

I thought about all the things I hadn't said while I painted.

The nights I'd lain awake, wanting to call him, scrolling to his contact and then setting the phone aside because I didn't know what words to use. The texts I'd composed in my head—I miss you, I'm sorry, I wish things were different—that never made it onto the screen because every version felt inadequate. The way his absence had hollowed out my days, leaving spaces that nothing else could fill.

I want you here with me.

The words I'd thought a thousand times but never spoken. They were flowing now through the brush, through the paint, embedding themselves in every stroke.

I wanted you here. I was just too scared to ask.

The petals multiplied, layering over each other with the organic complexity of real flowers. I added darker shades in the shadows—touches of crimson and burgundy creating depth—and lighter highlights where the petals would catch the light. The rose was becoming real, becoming dimensional, becoming the apology I couldn't speak.

I'm sorry I pushed you away. I'm sorry I made you think you weren't wanted. I'm sorry I was so broken that I broke us instead of asking for help.

The painting transformed under my hands. Est's gray-blue fingers, rendered with careful precision, now cradled something precious. Something alive. Something that said even in the darkness, I was reaching for color. Even when I pushed you away, I was trying to hold onto you.

I worked for hours, losing track of time in the way I only could when the work was really flowing. The studio faded away. The guilt faded away. Everything faded except

the brush and the canvas and the rose taking shape between painted fingers.

When I finally stepped back, my shoulders aching and my hands stained red, the painting was complete. The contrast was striking—dramatic in a way I hadn't fully anticipated. All that gray and blue, all that cold absence, now interrupted by a burst of living color. The rose sat between Est's hands like something precious and precarious, something that might be crushed or cherished depending on how gently it was held.

This is what I was trying to give you, the painting said. This is what I never managed to say.

I stood there looking at it for a long time.

The guilt was still there—it would always be there—but it felt different now. Less like a weight crushing me down and more like a companion I was learning to carry. I'd done something. I'd materialized my feelings, given them physical form, taken one small brave action toward making amends.

The painting wouldn't undo what I'd done. It wouldn't erase the screaming, the panic attack, the moment I'd thrown him out instead of asking for help. It wouldn't make Est forgive me. But it was honest. It was the most honest thing I'd ever created about us. And maybe—maybe that was enough. Maybe the act of offering was valuable even if the offer was rejected. Maybe I was learning, slowly and painfully, that recovery wasn't about fixing everything I'd broken. It was about trying anyway. About taking steps forward even when the destination was uncertain. I pulled out my phone and took a photo of the finished painting.

The image was imperfect—phone cameras couldn't capture the texture of oil paint, the subtle variations in color—but it was enough. Enough to see what I'd made. Enough to remember this moment when the fear felt too big and the guilt felt too heavy.

You did something, I told myself. You took a step.

The window in the living room was still closed now, but the memory of the fresh air lingered. The world outside was still there, still turning, still waiting for me to join it.

One small victory at a time.

One painted apology at a time.

One trembling, imperfect, terrifyingly brave action at a time.

The rose was finished. I set down my brush and stepped back, letting my eyes adjust to the painting as a whole rather than the individual strokes I'd been obsessing over for hours. The digital clock on my laptop—open on the worktable, playing ambient music to fill the silence—read 10:47 AM. Almost three hours since

I'd started. Almost three hours lost to the work, swallowed whole by the particular trance that descended when creation was really flowing.

The rose seemed alive. That was the first coherent thought that formed as I studied what I'd made. It didn't look painted—it looked grown, as if it had somehow emerged from the gray-blue void of Est's hands through sheer force of will. The petals curved with organic precision, catching imaginary light, casting imaginary shadows. The red was so vibrant against the muted background that it almost hurt to look at, like staring directly at something that was trying to tell me a secret.

And maybe it was.

Hello, the rose seemed to say. Or perhaps: Where were you? Why did it take you so long?

I stood there for a long moment, letting the painting speak to me in whatever language paintings used. The guilt was still present—it would always be present—but there was something else now too. Something that felt almost like accomplishment. Like I'd taken all the tangled mess of emotion inside me and given it form, given it color, given it a voice that didn't require words.

This is my apology, I thought. This is the best I can do.

Whether it would be enough—whether Est would understand it, accept it, even look at it—that was beyond my control. But the making of it had been in my control. And I'd made it.

My phone buzzed, pulling me out of my contemplation.

A notification. Email. The sight of my manager's name on the screen made my heart rate spike—she'd responded faster than I'd expected, faster than I'd dared hope. I opened the message with trembling fingers.

William, The address you requested is below. I obtained it through the company's records—I hope that's acceptable. Please let me know if you need anything else for the shipment.

Best,

[Manager's name]

Beneath her signature was an address. Est's address. A string of numbers and street names that represented a real place in the real world where Est actually lived, where he slept and ate and existed in all the ordinary ways that people existed.

I stared at it for a long time.

This was one of the things I appreciated most about my manager—her efficiency,

her discretion, her absolute lack of unnecessary questions. Another person might have asked why. Might have wanted to know the story behind the request, might have demanded explanations or offered unsolicited advice. But she simply did what I asked, quickly and professionally, trusting that I had my reasons.

She'd been invaluable during the worst years of my isolation. Handling the business side of things—the galleries, the collectors, the endless logistics of selling art when the artist couldn't leave his apartment—with a competence that had kept my career alive even when I could barely keep myself alive. My paintings sold better because of her. My reputation remained intact because of her. She was the bridge between my internal chaos and the external world, and I was more grateful than I'd ever properly expressed.

Thank you, I typed back. This means more than I can say.

I hit send before I could second-guess the sentiment. Then I saved Est's address to my contacts, my heart pounding with the weight of what I was about to do.

The practical considerations came next.

The painting was wet. Fresh oil paint needed time to cure—days, ideally, or weeks for complete stability. But I didn't have days. I didn't have weeks. If I waited that long, I'd lose my nerve. The courage that had carried me through the morning would fade, replaced by the familiar paralysis of doubt and fear. I needed the painting to dry faster. The drying agent I used was already mixed into my medium—a special formula that accelerated the oxidation process. Three hours, maybe four, and the surface should be touch-dry enough for careful handling. Not ideal for long-term preservation, but acceptable for shipping.

I carried the painting carefully toward the living room, searching for the optimal drying spot. The large window—the one I'd opened earlier, the one that had felt like such a victory—seemed like the obvious choice. Natural light, good air circulation, the gentle warmth of the morning sun. I positioned the easel at an angle that would catch the light without risking direct exposure to the canvas, then stepped back to check my work.

The painting looked different in this light. The gray-blue tones were cooler, almost silver in places. The red of the rose blazed even brighter, impossible to ignore. Est's hands seemed to reach out toward the window, toward the world beyond the glass, toward something they couldn't quite touch.

Appropriate, I thought. That's exactly what I was trying to say.

For a moment, I considered using a hair dryer to speed the process further. The thought was immediately dismissed—hair dryers were too aggressive, too unpredictable, too likely to cause uneven drying that would crack the paint layer. Patience was required. Patience and faith that the painting would be ready in time. I

still had shipping boxes in my apartment. The supplies I'd accumulated for the exhibition pieces—bubble wrap, cardboard corners, packing tape—would work just as well for a personal delivery. I just had to wait.

It sounded like nothing. It was nothing, in the grand scheme of things. But as I stood there looking at the painting—at the apology I'd finally materialized, at the gift I'd never given—the minutes stretched into something vast and heavy.

I needed to do something. Needed to occupy my hands, my mind, my body. Waiting passively had never been my strength. During the worst of my illness, waiting had meant spiraling—thoughts circling endlessly, anxiety building without release. The new medication had helped with that, but I could still feel the edges of restlessness pressing in.

The studio was a mess.

That was always true, to some degree—creativity and order rarely coexisted peacefully in my workspace—but today the chaos felt more manageable. Addressable. Something I could fix while the paint dried and my thoughts settled.

I started with the brushes. They'd accumulated in jars of murky water, bristles bent and stained from use. I carried them to the sink in the corner of the studio—a small utility basin I'd had installed years ago, crucial for cleaning supplies without having to track paint through the apartment—and began the methodical process of washing. Warm water first, to soften the pigment. Then soap, worked through the bristles with careful fingers. Rinse, repeat, rinse again until the water ran clear. Each brush was laid flat on a clean cloth to dry, the bristles reshaped to their proper form. The work was meditative. The same motions repeated, the same gentle pressure, the same attention to detail. My thoughts wandered while my hands stayed occupied.

What will he think when he sees it?

The question surfaced unbidden. Est, opening a package. Est, pulling back layers of protective wrap. Est, confronting a painting of his own hands holding a rose that had never been given.

Would he understand?

Would he see the apology embedded in every brushstroke?

Would he throw it away without looking, still too hurt to accept anything from me?

I had no way to know. That was the nature of apologies—you offered them without guarantee of reception, trusting that the act of offering mattered even if the outcome was uncertain.

Face the consequences, Dr. Suriya had said. Even if he doesn't respond.



I was trying. God, I was trying.

The studio gradually transformed around me.

Paint tubes were organized by color family, arranged in the drawers where they belonged. Sketches were sorted and filed—some worth keeping, others destined for the recycling bin. The worktable was cleared, wiped down, restored to something resembling functionality.

I swept the floor, pushing accumulated debris into a corner pile. Dust and dried paint chips and the occasional failed sketch that had missed the bin. The physical labor felt good—grounding, purposeful, a reminder that I existed in a body that could do useful things.

My phone buzzed again.

This time it was a message, not an email. I set down the broom and checked the screen. Lego's name glowed there, accompanied by a string of characters that suggested a longer message.

P'Will, are you busy today? I was thinking of coming over, but I wanted to check first. Is that okay?

I stared at the words for a long moment. Something twisted in my chest—a complicated tangle of emotions that I couldn't quite sort out. Gratitude that he wanted to see me. Shame that he felt the need to ask permission. Sadness for everything that had changed between us.

There had been a time when Lego didn't ask.

When we were children—and the world was simpler—he would simply appear. My mother's house had been as much his home as his own, maybe more so. He'd show up on Saturday mornings without warning, already wearing his shoes, ready for whatever the day might hold.

And my mother—my beautiful, generous, endlessly welcoming mother—would feed him without question. Would set an extra place at the table, would make sure there were snacks he liked in the cupboard, would treat him like the second son she'd never formally had.

On weekends, we'd spend hours together. Board games spread across the living room floor. Card games at the kitchen table, my mother occasionally joining in, letting us win just often enough to keep things interesting. On nice days, we'd go to the garden—my mother's pride, her sanctuary, the place where she'd taught Lego everything about flowers that I'd failed to learn.

Later, when we were older—when we attended the same school and the complications of adolescence began to creep in—the pattern continued. My mother

would pick us both up after classes, her car becoming a shared refuge. I'd emerge from the school building to find Lego already waiting, perched on a bench outside, watching for me with patient eyes.

He always waited. Even when I was late. Even when I'd gotten into trouble. Even when I'd done something that landed me in the teacher's office with ice on my bruised knuckles and a lecture about appropriate ways to handle conflict.

There had been rumors about me at school. Whispers that followed me through hallways, speculation about the strange quiet boy who painted instead of playing sports, who couldn't seem to make friends, who sometimes exploded in violence when pushed too far. Other students kept their distance. Teachers watched me with wary eyes. But Lego stayed.

I remembered one day in particular—one of the bad days, when my temper had finally snapped and I'd hit someone who probably hadn't deserved it. The teacher had separated us, sent me to the office to wait for my mother, left me sitting there with a swelling cheek and a sense of shame so thick I could barely breathe.

Lego had appeared twenty minutes later. He'd walked into the office without being summoned, carrying a small bottle of juice from the cafeteria. He hadn't said anything—hadn't asked what happened, hadn't lectured me about my behavior, hadn't offered any of the unsolicited advice that adults always seemed to have. He'd just handed me the juice, sat down in the chair beside me, and waited with me until my mother arrived.

That was who Lego was. That was who he'd always been. And now—now he was asking permission to visit. Checking first. Making sure it was okay. Because I'd pushed him away so many times that he no longer trusted his welcome.

The realization hurt more than I'd expected.

I typed back before I could overthink it:

Why don't you come over for lunch?

The response was almost immediate—a photo appearing on my screen. Muffins. Golden-brown and perfectly domed, arranged on a cooling rack with obvious pride.

I'll bring dessert! the accompanying message read.

I smiled despite myself. Lego's new hobby—baking—had emerged sometime in the past few days, a sudden passion that seemed to consume whatever spare time his busy schedule allowed. He'd started with simple recipes—cookies, brownies, things that were hard to mess up—and gradually worked his way to more challenging projects. The muffins looked genuinely impressive.

Where does he find the time? I wondered. Between university classes and dance

practice and part-time jobs and taking care of me—how did he manage to have hours left for measuring flour and melting butter and whatever else baking required? But that was Lego. That had always been Lego. His days seemed to contain more minutes than anyone else's. He moved through life with an efficiency I'd never understood, somehow accomplishing ten things in the time it took me to accomplish one.

See you soon, I typed back.

Then I looked at the clock. 11:30 AM. Still time to prepare for the visit. Still time to do something I'd been building toward without quite acknowledging it.

The hours passed.

I kept checking the painting, touching the edges carefully to test the dryness. The surface was tacky at first, then gradually firmer, the layers of oil beginning their slow chemical transformation. By 12:30, the touch felt stable enough for gentle handling.

I would need to let it cure further before actual shipping, but the immediate crisis was past. The painting could be moved, could be packed, could begin its journey toward the address I'd saved in my phone.

Lego's message arrived at 1:00 PM exactly:

On my way!

Accompanied by a photo of himself in a taxi—his reflection visible in the window, his smile bright despite whatever exhaustion might be hiding underneath. His hair was different than I remembered—wavy and almost reaching his shoulders, the extensions gone, replaced by something more natural, more him. A plain black headband kept the strands back from his face. He looked young. Happy. Like someone who was on their way to see a person they loved.

I looked at my own reflection in my phone screen. Pale. Tired. The face of someone who'd spent the morning painting instead of eating properly. But also—something else. Something that might have been determination.

You can do this, I told myself. One step at a time.

I found a mask in the drawer by the door. It was one of the good ones—medical grade, properly fitted—left over from the worst of the pandemic, from the months when even I had been forced to acknowledge the existence of a world beyond my apartment. I'd worn them for grocery deliveries, for the rare occasions when someone other than Lego entered my space.

Today, the mask felt like armor. I slipped it over my face, adjusting the straps until it sat comfortably. The fabric covered everything from my nose to my chin, obscuring

the lower half of my features. Anonymous. Protected.

Safe.

I gathered my keys. My phone. Nothing else. No wallet—I wouldn't need it. No bag—there was nothing to carry. Just myself, masked and trembling, standing at the door of my apartment.

The door I hadn't crossed for anything except trash runs in three years.

The door that represented everything I was afraid of.

You made it to the elevator, I reminded myself. You walked Lego all the way to the elevator bank. That was thirty feet. Today you're going further. That's all. Just... further.

The logic helped, a little. The trembling didn't stop.

I opened the door.

The hallway was quiet. Empty. The same polished floors and neutral walls I'd seen yesterday, transformed by daylight into something almost welcoming. The fluorescent fixtures hummed softly overhead, casting their even glow on the path ahead.

Just a hallway, I told myself. Just space. You can do this.

I locked my door behind me—the click of the deadbolt sounding loud in the silence—and started walking.

The elevator bank was ahead. Thirty feet, maybe. A distance I'd already conquered once. But today I wasn't stopping there.

Today I was going down.

The thought made my stomach clench. Down meant the lobby. The lobby meant people—strangers, residents, security guards, all the random humans who moved through shared spaces without thinking about it. The lobby meant glass doors that opened onto the street. The lobby meant the world.

The world where my mother no longer existed.

That thought hit me harder than I'd expected. I stopped walking, my breath catching, my hands pressed against the hallway wall for support.

She's not out there, my brain whispered. She's gone. The whole world is empty of her. What's the point of going into a world where she doesn't exist?

But then—slowly, reluctantly—another thought followed.

She's not in the apartment either.

The truth of it was devastating and liberating at once. I'd been hiding in my apartment as if staying inside could somehow preserve her. As if my isolation was a memorial, a way of keeping her memory alive by refusing to move on. But she wasn't there. Hadn't been there in years. The apartment held evidence of her—the sheets she'd given me, the tea she'd chosen, the organizational systems she'd taught me—but it didn't hold her.

Nothing held her anymore. Not the apartment. Not the lobby. Not the world outside.

She was gone from all of it equally.

Which meant—which had to mean—that going outside wasn't leaving her behind. I'd already left her behind, years ago, when she'd slipped away in that hospital bed while I held her hand and begged her to stay.

Going outside is just... going outside, I realized. It doesn't change anything about her. It only changes something about me.

I pushed off from the wall. My legs felt unsteady, but they moved when I asked them to. The elevator bank came closer with each step.

I pressed the button.

The doors opened.

I stepped inside.

The elevator was empty. A small mercy.

I positioned myself in the corner, my back against two walls, my eyes fixed on the digital display above the doors. The lobby button glowed when I pressed it, a confirmation that my trembling finger had accomplished its task.

The doors slid closed.

The elevator began its descent. With each floor, the anxiety increased. Numbers counting down—15, 14, 13—each one representing a layer of building between me and the ground. Each one bringing me closer to the lobby, to the people, to the world I'd been hiding from.

My heart was pounding so hard I could feel it in my temples. My palms were slick with sweat despite the climate-controlled air. The mask suddenly felt suffocating, the fabric pressing against my nose and mouth like something trying to smother me.

You can do this, I told myself. You're already doing it. Just breathe. Just wait. The doors will open and you'll step out and Lego will be there and everything will be

fine.

10, 9, 8...

There are people out there. Strangers. People who might look at you, judge you, wonder why you're wearing a mask, wonder why you're trembling, wonder what's wrong with you—

7, 6, 5...

People are dangerous. People hurt you. People leave. Everyone leaves eventually. Mom left. Est left. Everyone—

4, 3, 2...

But Mom isn't in the apartment either. She's not anywhere. The world without her is everywhere now. There's no hiding from it.

1.

Lobby.

The doors opened.

The lobby was bright. That was my first impression—the abundance of light, streaming through the glass front of the building, illuminating a space that seemed impossibly vast after the confines of my apartment. The ceiling soared overhead. The floor stretched in every direction. People moved through the space—not many, but some—their footsteps echoing, their voices a low murmur of ordinary conversation.

I stepped out of the elevator.

The motion felt monumental. World-changing. As if I'd crossed some invisible threshold that could never be uncrossed. My feet touched the lobby floor—the same material as my hallway, the same polished surface, but somehow different because it was shared space. Public space. Space where anyone could be.

I looked around, taking it in. The security desk was near the entrance, manned by a guard I vaguely recognized from the countless delivery interactions I'd had over the years. He wasn't looking at me. Wasn't paying attention to the masked figure who'd just emerged from the elevator.

Good. Good.

There was a seating area to one side—a cluster of sofas arranged around a low table, designed for residents waiting for guests or deliveries. One of the sofas faced directly toward the entrance, offering a clear view of everyone who came and went.

I walked toward it. My legs felt like they belonged to someone else. My breath was too fast, too shallow, fogging slightly inside my mask. But I kept moving, one foot in front of the other, until I reached the sofa and lowered myself onto its cushions.

I did it, I thought. I'm in the lobby. I'm outside my apartment. I'm... here.

The thought was dizzying. Overwhelming. I gripped the edge of the sofa cushion, anchoring myself to something solid, and tried to regulate my breathing.

In for four. Hold for four. Out for four. Again.

The technique was one Dr. Suriya had taught me—a simple tool for managing acute anxiety, for pulling myself back from the edge of panic. I used it now, counting breaths, focusing on the physical sensation of air moving through my lungs.

Slowly, gradually, the world stopped spinning.

I started counting people.

It was something to do. Something to occupy my mind while I waited for Lego, while my nervous system gradually accepted that the lobby wasn't actually dangerous. Each person who entered or exited became a data point—age, gender, clothing, purpose. A young woman in workout clothes, heading for the gym. An older man with groceries, returning from shopping. A couple with a small dog, on their way out for a walk.

None of them paid me any attention. None of them even glanced in my direction.

I was invisible. Just another figure in a mask, sitting on a sofa, waiting for someone. Unremarkable. Unnoticed. Safe. The realization helped more than I'd expected. I'd been so afraid of being seen—of being judged, questioned, exposed—that I'd forgotten how little most people actually noticed each other. They were absorbed in their own lives, their own concerns, their own journeys from point A to point B. A stranger sitting in the lobby was background noise. Irrelevant. Not worth investigating.

My phone buzzed.

A message from Lego: Almost there!

I looked up at the entrance just as the glass doors swung open.

He was wearing a gray sweater that showed off his shoulders, layered over a black tank top that peeked out beneath the neckline. His shorts were slightly puffy—the fashionable kind that seemed to be everywhere lately—paired with boots that added an inch or two to his height.

But what caught my attention was the bag.

It was a crossbody style, the strap cutting diagonally across his chest, the body of the bag resting at his hip. And on the front—clearly visible, utterly charming—was a transparent heart-shaped pocket stuffed with tiny stuffed animals. They pressed against the plastic like prisoners peering out of a cell, their button eyes seeming to plead for freedom.

That was so completely, perfectly Lego that I almost laughed.

He greeted the security guard as he entered—a small wave, a bright smile, the easy social grace that had always come naturally to him. His eyes scanned the lobby as he walked, searching.

They found me.

I saw the moment of recognition—the slight widening of his eyes, the pause in his step, the way his whole face seemed to light up like someone had flipped a switch. Even with the mask covering half my face, even sitting in an unexpected location, he knew me instantly.

He froze for just a second.

Then he ran.

"P'Will!"

The shout echoed through the lobby as he launched himself across the remaining distance. I barely had time to stand before he was there, crashing into me with the full force of his momentum, his arms wrapping around my neck, his feet leaving the ground.

I caught him instinctively.

My hands found his waist, his thighs, supporting his weight as he clung to me like a koala latching onto a tree. He was heavier than he looked—denser with muscle from years of dance training—but I held him steady, my arms remembering the motion even if my conscious mind was still catching up.

"You're here!" His voice was muffled against my shoulder, thick with emotion I hadn't expected. "You came down! P'Will, you came all the way down!"

"Hi," I said. The word was inadequate, but it was all I could manage. A smile was spreading across my face, invisible beneath the mask but real nonetheless. "I wanted to surprise you."

He pulled back just enough to look at my face, his eyes searching what was visible above the fabric. Whatever he saw there must have satisfied him, because his expression shifted from shock to joy to something softer, something that looked almost like pride.



"You came to the lobby," he repeated, as if saying it again would make it more real. "You took the elevator down. You're outside your apartment."

"I am."

"Because of me?"

The question was vulnerable in a way that caught me off guard. As if he couldn't quite believe he was worth such an effort. As if my presence in the lobby was a gift beyond anything he deserved.

"Because of you," I confirmed. "And because I'm trying to be better. Because my therapist keeps telling me to take small steps. Because—" I hesitated, searching for the right words. "Because you always come to me. Every Wednesday. Every crisis. Every time I need someone, you're there. And I thought... maybe I could come to you, for once. Just once."

His eyes filled with tears. Not sad tears—I could tell the difference now, after years of reading his expressions—but the overwhelmed kind. The kind that came when something touched you too deeply for words. "You're going to make me cry in the lobby," he said, his voice wobbling.

"Then cry. I don't mind."

"P'Will—"

"I mean it." I set him down gently, but kept my hands on his shoulders, maintaining the connection. "You've cried in my apartment enough times. You're allowed to cry in my lobby too."

He laughed at that—a wet, surprised sound—and wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand. "You're getting better at jokes."

"I've been practicing."

"On who?"

"Myself, mostly. The paintings don't laugh."

He laughed again, and this time it was steadier. Real. The Lego-laugh I remembered from years of friendship, bright and infectious and impossible to resist.

We stood there in the lobby for a moment longer, neither of us quite ready to move. The security guard had gone back to his duties. The other residents had passed through without pausing. We existed in a small bubble of our own making, reconnecting after too long apart.

I thought about what I'd accomplished this morning.

The painting. The rose. The email to my manager, the address obtained, the apology taking shape.

And now this.

Coming down to the lobby. Greeting Lego in person. Proving—to him, to myself, to whatever cosmic observers might be watching—that I could take steps forward. That I wasn't completely trapped inside my own fear.

If I could do this for Lego, a small voice whispered, maybe I could do other things too.

Maybe I could make Est happy someday.

The thought arrived unbidden, and I almost flinched away from it. It felt presumptuous. Arrogant. The kind of fantasy that someone like me had no right to entertain. Est deserved so much better than me. Someone who could leave their apartment without a panic attack. Someone who could love without breaking. Someone whose mental illness hadn't already destroyed the fragile thing that had been growing between them.

But you came to the lobby.

The counter-thought was gentle but insistent.

You painted the rose. You sent the email. You're trying.

Trying isn't enough, the darker voice responded. Trying doesn't undo what you did. Trying doesn't make you worthy of a second chance.

Maybe not. But trying is all you have.

I pushed the internal argument aside. There would be time for that later—time for guilt and self-recrimination and the endless loop of wondering whether I'd ever be good enough. Right now, Lego was here. Right now, the lobby was conquered. Right now, there was lunch to eat and muffins to share and the simple pleasure of being with someone who loved me.

"Come on," I said, nodding toward the elevator. "Let's go upstairs. I want to see these famous muffins."

Lego's face lit up again. "They're blueberry. I used a new recipe. And I added lemon zest, which the video said would brighten the flavor, and—" He was still talking as we walked toward the elevator, still describing the muffins in elaborate detail, still being exactly who he'd always been. I listened with half my attention, the other half marveling at the simple fact of walking beside him.

I came to the lobby, I thought again. I'm going back upstairs, but I came to the

lobby first.

The elevator doors opened. We stepped inside together. And as the car began its ascent, carrying us back toward the familiar safety of my apartment, I felt something I hadn't felt in a very long time.

Hope.

Fragile and uncertain, easily crushed if I looked at it too directly.

But there.